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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Monday, January 31, 1938

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "IF IT'S PINK, IT'S POISON." Facts about insecticides from the Federal Food and Drug Administration, United States Department of Agriculture.

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"If It's Pink, It's Poison."

That's the startling title of today's report from the Federal Food and Drug Administration, which enforces the Insecticide Act.

And therein lies the clue. If it's a pink-colored insecticide -- that is, a pink-colored agricultural, arsenical insecticide -- it's poison, and not to be confused with flour, baking powder, or soda. For the arsenicals -- calcium arsenate used for spraying vegetables, and lead arsenate used for fruits -- are white powders with no distinctive odor to warn the careless cook.

That is, they were white powders, until -- But here's the first item in today's report. Quoting directly:

"The Agricultural Insecticide and Fungicide Association, in an announcement dated November 27, 1937, stated: 'In the interests of public health and for the protection of users of agricultural arsenical insecticides, this Industry has, by voluntary agreement, adopted and will use a pink color in all white arsenical products.'

"It is the belief of the Industry that this action represents a constructive effort by the Industry to eliminate as far as possible the hazard of mistaken identity of the products, and that in time the pink color will become established as a distinctive warning of the poisonous nature of the material.'

"W. G. Campbell, Chief of the Food and Drug Administration, in a letter complimenting the industry on its decision to adopt this safety measure stated, in part: 'I am gratified indeed to learn that the manufacturers have reached this decision. As you know, we have been deeply concerned with the recurring cases of food poisoning due to the accidental use of these arsenicals in place of flour in the home. It seems incredible that such carelessness exists, but it is a fact that we are called upon to investigate, every year, at least two or three cases of serious poisoning due to this cause. So serious has it become that as a matter of routine we are issuing a warning two or three times a year, against the storage of dangerous poisons near the domestic food supply. I hope the plan to add color will go a long way towards correcting this very bad situation.'"

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Well -- there seems to be absolutely no excuse for anybody ever mistaking an insecticide for flour. If it's pink -- it's poison. But even with that warning, do you know what I'd do? I'd keep all kinds of insecticides -- arsenicals or otherwise -- I'd keep them out of the kitchen, out of the reach of children. The garage or shed is the place for dangerous insecticides -- not the pantry shelf.

Now let's bring ourselves up to date on the number of household insecticides examined last year by the Food and Drug Administration. Here's information for consumers, from Mr. Campbell's latest annual report. Again, quoting directly:

"Owing to improved methods of testing, there has been a marked increase in the number of household insecticides examined. A large number of the weaker or ineffective preparations have been removed from the market, or the manufacturer has increased their strength. The general standard of such products now on the market is decidedly higher than it was a few years ago."

As for moth-proofing -- "The labeling of materials sold for mothproofing has required continued attention. The principal inorganic materials recommended for this purpose are sodium and potassium arsenates and arsenites, sodium fluoride, and sodium and magnesium fluosilicates. These materials are generally applied in solution, to woollens, by spraying or dipping the goods. Thorough coverage is necessary, as every fiber, in order to be protected, must have its complement of arsenic or fluorine. Dilutions containing less than one-fourth percent of the active compound cannot be relied on to give protection. Washing in water reduces or removes entirely the mothproofing value of these compounds. Mothproofing agents of an organic nature are applied in oil solution. These are usually removed from the treated articles by dry cleaning, and long exposure to sunlight reduces the effectiveness of many of them.

"Products sold to protect woollens from moth damage by enticing the moths away from them have been tested and found worthless, and such articles encountered on the market have been removed by seizure action. Further work on paradichlorobenzene (para-dye-cloro-ben-zene) and naphthalene, packed in perforated containers for use against moths, has shown great variation in effectiveness, due to the style of packing. The perforations in the containers must be of sufficient number and size so that vaporization of the moth-killing agent is not retarded, or they must be recommended for use at a higher dosage than the usually recommended 1 pound per hundred cubic feet of tightly confined space. As a result of this work, many worthless products of this type have been put off the market."

As for the ant poisons -- "Many of the ant poisons, consisting of a sirup with a poison such as sodium arsenate, sodium arsenite, or thallium sulphate, have been labeled as being effective against all types of ants. Such claims have been found to be unjustified. Certain ants feed on greases, and others feed on sweets. A sirup is not attractive to ants of the former type and it has, therefore, been necessary to require that the label claims for ant poisons be limited accordingly."
